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CRISIS FOR THE CONTRAS

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua—Six months of intensive efforts by the CIA to unify the Nicaraguan counterrevolution culminated May 30 with a powerful bomb blast during a press conference held by Eden Pastora along the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border. Seven people were killed and Pastora and 27 others—mainly journalists—were seriously injured.

While the full investigation into the incident is still continuing, it is clear that the explosion was an attempt to eliminate the ex-Sandinista, who had become the last remaining obstacle to the imminent CIA-orchestrated fusion of the two principal counterrevolutionary groupings. These are the Honduran-based Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), made up mostly of former Somocista National Guardsmen, and the Costa Rican-based Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE), which is headed by Pastora and Alfonso Robelo.

The blast went off some 20 minutes after Pastora began his press conference in the locality of La Penca, on the banks of the San Juan river, which forms the border between the two countries. The conference was to explain the deep crisis wracking ARDE and Pastora's dispute with Robelo over unification with the Somocistas. It was expected that he would declare the defection of his organization, the Sandino Revolutionary Front (FRS), from the ARDE alliance, although the explosion came before any announcement could be made. The wounded, including Pastora and his chief deputy "Tito" Chamorro and numerous journalists—were taken by the Costa Rican Red Cross to hospitals in San Jose. Those killed by the powerful blast were U.S. journalist Lynda Frazier and Costa Rican cameraman Jorge Quiroz, along with five members of ARDE.

Subsequent investigations by the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Security confirmed June 1 that the bomb was placed in the camera bag of one of the reporters. On the basis of the injuries and recovered bomb fragments, it was determined that the explosive device was a "C-4" bomb, a sophisticated explosive manufactured exclusively by the CIA and regularly supplied to the counterrevolutionaries.

While there is little doubt that the incident is the product of the internal quarrels within the Nicaraguan counterrevolution, two possible explanations have been put forward: that it was an operation of the CIA itself, or that it was the work of FDN or ARDE elements opposed to Pastora. In either case, the motive would be the same: to eliminate Pastora as an obstacle to counterrevolutionary unity.

The CIA's long-standing project to form one united counterrevolutionary organization actually began shortly after the Reagan administration took office, with the amalgamation of the dispersed Somocista forces in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and the U.S. into the FDN umbrella grouping. The project then took a qualitative step forward in April 1982, when the CIA successfully formed the ARDE alliance out of the FRS of Pastora (who had publicly defected from the Sandinista government earlier that year), the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement (MDN) of self-exiled Nicaraguan business tycoon Alfonso Robelo, the faction of the Misura Miskito Organization that is faithful to Brooklyn Rivera, and the Nicaraguan Democratic Union (UDN) of Fernando "El Negro" Chamorro.

The culmination of the project was to be the final fusion of the FDN and ARDE into one organization under a unified command structure. The idea was that ARDE would provide the international political credibility, given Pastora's personal charisma and reputation as a former Sandinista hero. That the Somocistas could not gain as a result of their historical rejection in and outside of Nicaragua as murderers and political thugs. This unity would also achieve the close coordination of the northern and southern contra military fronts and allow for the CIA to exercise maximum control over the entire apparatus.

Plans for the ARDE-FDN fusion moved into high gear last Dec. 1, when Washington's then-roving ambassador to Central America, Richard Stone, met in Panama City with the leaders of all the contra groupings to work out the unification details. In a press conference after that meeting, Stone declared, "I have all the information and now I will work on this. The fusion is difficult, but not impossible."

STRATEGY CHANGED

While a tacit alliance has been in effect since mid-1983, coordination was sharply stepped up for the current contra offensive, which began in late March. On May 17, the FDN's chief commander, Adolfo Calero Portocarrero, reported in the Honduran capital that his organization had already sent Somocista units to northern Costa Rica to reinforce ARDE, and had opened its own "southern front."

ARDE originally tried to maintain an image of independence from both the Somocistas and the CIA because the strategy was to present ARDE under Pastora's leadership as "an alternative to both Somocismo and Sandinismo." But Washington's strategy changed following the successive defeats at the hands of the Sandinista People's Army of the three large-scale contra offensives in 1983. The "secret war" which relied on the armed contras as the principal vehicle for bringing down the Sandinista government has become an open war carried out with the increasingly direct involvement of U.S. forces, in which the contras are relegated to frontline shock troops preparing the terrain for a U.S. intervention. Within this context, image becomes less important (thus Reagan refers directly to the Somocistas as "freedom fighters"). Pastora's image as an "independent alternative" is no longer deemed necessary.

According to U.S. press reports, Pastora became the "most sought-after" counterrevolutionary last February, when he traveled to Washington for a series of meetings with CIA Director William Casey, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Jeane Kirkpatrick, other U.S. government officials and FDN leaders. The result of the visit was a greatly stepped up CIA supply of weapons and logistical support, vividly seen in the contras' increased military capacity since March. Neither Pastora nor other ARDE leaders attempt to hide their CIA sponsorship any longer. When ARDE's U.S. backing was extensively exposed in various international press reports published last April, Robelo admitted for the first time, "We are receiving CIA funding."

According to a May 29 New York Times report, Robelo was told during a late-April trip to Washington that he and "Pastora had 30 days, starting from the first of May, to announce the fusion with the FDN," and if not, CIA funding

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would be cut off.

Washington's ultimatum sparked a flurry of activity among counterrevolutionary ranks, and also paved the way for the current internal crisis within the alliance. On May 15, ARDE representatives traveled to Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, to meet with the Somocista leaders, writing up a draft unity pact which was accepted by all present except Pastora. Then on May 17, the ARDE leadership held another meeting in San Jose, this time without Pastora's participation, in which they announced that the FDN had accepted "almost all of the propositions" in the draft pact, and that "the road is open" for the fusion. On May 21, FDN leader Alfonso Callejas traveled to the Costa Rican capital to hammer out the final details, and all that was lacking was a press conference to formally announce the unification.

But Pastora, while expressing his support in principle for unity, released an FRS communique May 20 declaring that it could not be a "pressured unity which would be artificial and ephemeral," and complaining that "dark forces [the CIA] are trying to impose pressures with manipulations and false expectations."

'FEARS FOR HIS LIFE'

Despite the rhetoric, Pastora's chief contention is that while he has no qualms about unity with the Somocistas, he believes that he deserves to be installed as "supreme commander." But this demand is unacceptable to Washington, which prefers to subordinate ARDE to the Somocistas as the force that guarded U.S. interests in Nicaragua for 50 years.

By the last week of May, the Costa Rican press was describing the crisis within ARDE as "grave, very grave." As the accusations and counter-accusations heated up, a final meeting of all ARDE-affiliated groups was held, during which Robelo warned Pastora to succumb and announced that the fusion would be consummated "with or without the cooperation of Pastora," according to an Agence France Presse (AFP) dispatch. Pastora responded by giving Robelo three days to "reconsider his attitude," and, according to the AFP report, Pastora's men said that "he constantly fears for his life at this time."

With the three days up, Pastora called his press conference on May 30—the same day that the 1-month CIA ultimatum expired. He was expected to announce his split from ARDE and expose inner details of the unification process which might have been embarrassing to many, not the least Washington.

While Pastora was taken by ambulance on June 1 under heavy security to the San Jose Airport, where he departed to Venezuela to recover, FRS spokespersons publicly charged that the CIA was responsible for the explosion.